

THE FUTURE OF PRISON RADIO:
DOES INMATE-PRODUCED RADIO HAVE A PLACE IN
THE AMERICAN PRISON SYSTEM?

by

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A THESIS

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This project explores the value and influence of National Prison Radio (NPR)—the only national prison radio network in the world, existing only inside 107 British prisons and streaming to 73,000 potential listeners—through observation and participation at two NPR producing prisons, HMP (Her Majesty’s Prison) Brixton and HMP Coldingley. I begin by introducing the prison and the formation of the HMP Brixton radio station and explaining NPR’s funding model. I then introduce Julian Mullins and Jimmy Batchelor, two former inmate producers whose testimony is integral throughout this paper. I then discuss the production of five NPR shows and describe my interactions with the inmates who produce them, as well as describe the critical issues discussed at both the Brixton station review and the NPR staff meeting. Then I discuss three of the most complex issues associated with producing prison radio: creating a listening community, creating productive relationships between inmates and outside staff, and navigating the issue of on-air identity. Next, I frame prison radio theoretically by incorporating scholarly research and testimony from inmates to illuminate the psychological influence of radio in a prison setting and how radio plays into the

psychological effect of prison and the paradigm of restorative justice. I conclude by synthesizing my findings into recommendations on how to structure a prison radio project in the United States.

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Introduction

In a time when everything is on the Internet and every piece of media recorded has been catalogued in some corner of the web, National Prison Radio (NPR) is an anomaly. According to Phil Maguire, a former producer and reporter for BBC Radio 2 and the current Chief Executive the Prison Radio Association, the content streamed 24/7 from Brixton into 107 prisons around England and Wales will never be accessed by the public.

“We don’t broadcast beyond the bars,” Phil Maguire told me. “I think the reason the programming is such good quality is because it’s so tightly focused: we make programs specifically for prisoners. If we were streaming on the Internet, or if we were offering our programs to anybody else to rebroadcast, I think it would dilute the quality of the programming.”

When I first heard Maguire talk about NPR’s work at the 2013 What is Radio? Conference in Portland, I was hugely inspired by the idea that prisoners, the most disenfranchised members of society, could produce and consume their own national media network. I was also disgruntled by that fact that I couldn’t listen to NPR for myself. But most importantly, I was confused by what Maguire told me in an interview after his talk.

Though he had helped with prison radio projects in Trinidad and Tobago, Hungary, Sweden, Spain, and others, nobody from the US had ever contacted him.

Over the course of the next year, I became obsessed with the idea of prison radio in America—a widespread inmate media service that could empower, inform, and entertain the US’ massive inmate population. I realized that it would be an ideal

journalism thesis subject, as NPR producers create journalism that is unique in three ways: First, NPR is able to target its content more specifically than any outside journalism outlet—they know exactly who their audience is, and how big it is. But they know a lot more than that, according to Maguire:

“Almost by osmosis, we know what our audience wants, because our audience are our presenters and our producers. Not only do we know that, but we know what time they get up, what time they go to bed, what time they get out of their cell, what time they have their lunch. We can focus our content really, really tightly on things that are relevant to them and their experience.”

Second, the incarcerated producers work in a closed system. They don't have access to the Internet or cell phones, so everything they report on and base their information off of must be within the prison system. This ensures that the pace of news is slow and measured, and includes a lot of legwork by necessity.

Third, NPR reports on the stories and issues in the lives of one of the truly voiceless groups in our society. Though the content mostly does not reach the outside, it serves what I believe is one of the most important roles of journalism, which is to make people care more about where they live and who they live near to by illuminating the stories around them.

When Maguire and the NPR staff allowed me to come observe their work in fall 2014, I went with three questions: How does NPR work? What is its value to and influence on inmates? And how could it be replicated in America?

Methodology

This paper is based mostly on my time in around London, England last fall, from October 17-31. I spent three days at HMP Brixton in south London, two days at HMP Coldingley near Woking, attended an on-the-street recording of a segment for NPR, attended a taping of an Outside In show for NPR at a BBC studio, and spent days in both Derby and Dorset interviewing former NPR inmate producers Jimmy Batchelor and Julian Mullins. I was only allowed to bring a pad and pen into the prisons, so the quotes I have from inside are fragmented. To flesh out these details, I have included my more detailed recorded discussions with Batchelor and Mullins.

There are many reasons for NPR's success: the structure of the British prison system, its connection with the BBC, the fundraising efforts of the Prison Radio Association, the initial government grant. The value of these things cannot be understated, and I will touch on them in the beginning of the paper. But I believe there is nothing more important to the success of NPR than the people who make up its staff. So I have dedicated much of this paper to descriptions of what goes on inside these two NPR stations: the personalities, the relationships, and the shows. I have written much it in first person because a few inmates asked to interview me and record bits of audio for them, and I believe the experiences and conversations I had with them do a lot to explain the NPR production process and the role that it plays in inmates' prison experience.

My research is biased by the fact that Phil Maguire and Chris Impey of PRA facilitated my access to both tapings, to the prisons and the BBC, and to all the incarcerated and outside staff of NPR.

National Prison Radio

National Prison Radio is based in Brixton Prison, a towering Victorian radial prison (meaning that the wings shoot off of a central building) built in 1819 in South London and reclassified as a resettlement prison in 2012. It houses C and D category prisoners, which either means that inmates are deemed not ready for an open prison but unlikely attempt escape (C category, or “C cat”) or that inmates can handle open prison conditions in which they work outside the prison and go on temporary home leaves (D category, or “D cat”). Though apartments and shops surround the prison, it is mostly obscured to the outside world by a tall brick wall lined with big white security cameras and rolls of barbed wire.

The station itself sits in the center of the prison below the chapel. It’s a decent sized room with a few barred windows, two recording studios, and many computers outfitted with Adobe Audition audio editing software. It is the latest and most expansive incarnation of prison radio in Britain, which was originally founded in 1994 as a way to prevent nighttime loneliness and self-harm among the young men at HMP Feltham in west London. Brixton Prison is home to some forward-thinking rehabilitation programs, notably a televised cooking class for inmates taught by chef Gordon Ramsey. Similarly, NPR has attracted positive attention for Brixton, lauded on prison’s online Justice Ministry page as “an award-winning education charity that engages hard-to-reach prisoners in the production of radio programming and encourages the prison radio audience to become active learners, engaging with the range of advice, support services and opportunities available to them.”

NPR first existed as Electric Radio Brixton in 2007, and in 2009 it began streaming in to the cells of 107 prisons around England and Wales, becoming the hub of National Prison Radio. In recent years, smaller versions of the station have been constructed at HMP Coldingley, HMP Styall, and HMP Hindley.

To tune into NPR, inmates need only flip on their cell television and tune it to the NPR audio channel, transforming the screen into an ugly, radiant block of blue. Though this process is perhaps intuitive, the fact that inmates have control over whether they listen to NPR, commercial radio (though many inmates can't afford analog radios), or watch television is crucial, and means that all criticism and suggestions that NPR receives are from willing listeners and participants.

The primary way that inmates get the opportunity to become an NPR producer is by electing to participate in an audio production course. At Brixton, the 5-week full time courses are led by a tough, good-humored woman named Sylvia, who was beloved and respected by all the inmate producers I talked to. Sylvia's classroom has a much looser atmosphere than the radio station, as it attracts many inmates who are interested in producing their own hip-hop and grime songs ("half of Brixton are wannabe rappers," NPR managing editor Chris Impey told me). Often, Sylvia said, inmates send the songs they produce in her class to be played on NPR, though they have to be carefully selected as many songs can be too explicit for NPR play (a lyric from a song one inmate showed me: "David Cameron's sittin' with his feet up/He don't give a shit").

The process of picking inmates to work on NPR from the groups that complete the audio production course seems to be based on recommendations from Sylvia, but

there is more to it than that. Former HMP Brixton governor Paul McDowell was quoted in *The Guardian* in 2009 as being wary of the political liability of employing violent offenders at the radio station (for reference, Ian Huntley was convicted in the 2002 killing of two 10-year old girls in Soham, Cambridgeshire):

“I am a prison governor and half of my life is spent managing the politics of prisoners. One of the things I am not going to do is put Ian Huntley on a radio station to deliver a programme every week. That is opening us up [to attack] and if we get criticised for that then we might end up losing the whole thing.”¹

When I asked Maguire in 2013 about NPR’s selection policy, he was careful to put his answer in vague terms:

“It’s a very interesting question. The short answer is, that although we don’t broadcast beyond prison, we have to be very aware of victim issues. What we have to consider is, if there’s a victim of a serious crime, and they hear about a prisoner involved in a radio project, making a program, that could have a really negative impact on them. So we do carefully select the prisoners.”

Alex Cavendish, a former inmate who served in five prisons between 2012 and 2014 (none of which streamed NPR), created the popular blog *Prison UK: An Insider’s View* and writes a monthly column for *Jail Mail*, one of the three national prison magazines, told me through e-mail that by necessity the selection process likely has to do with more than inmates’ criminal records:

“I think that being involved with anything like NPR must be positive for those prisoners who can do so. However, I suspect that – as with prison magazines – those involved tend to be an elite minority: literate, motivated, articulate. A majority of prisoners have serious literacy problems—most have the reading/writing ability of the average 11-year old or lower—then the numbers involved with NPR will be small. It will be seen as a privileged activity for a tiny number of ‘elite’ inmates.”

¹ Plunkett, John. "Brixton Prison Radio 'a Daily Mail Story Waiting to Happen', Says Governor." *The Guardian*. *Guardian News*, 30 June 2009. Web. 1 May 2015.

According to NPR's Impact Snapshot published in 2013, that year 94 inmates worked as radio producers, which was indeed a small percentage of the prison system's population of 84,000.

NPR producers are in charge of a huge range of shows, including morning programs, news shows, serialized book shows, traditional music mix shows and request shows, during which the producer plays songs requested by listeners and reads written explanations for the request. NPR also produces spots to promote programs within the prison system and a popular news show called Prime Time, which features interviews and reports about large issues within British prisons, often edited together as deftly as BBC Radio 1 segments.

These kinds of informational broadcasts highlight a function of radio that is often ignored—the simple fact that it relays messages without the written word.

Maguire says that inmates often do not connect with written messages:

“Whenever you go into a prison, you just see notice boards everywhere, with posters and leaflets, many of which have been there for several years and are out of date, or many of which are badly designed or there's too much text. Then consider that the average reading age for a prisoner is same as that of an eleven-year-old—very many prisoners can't read and write, or read and write well.”

Corroborating this fact, a 2010 study by CIVITAS stated that 48% of British prisoners have literacy skills below that which is expected of an 11 year old. There is a similar trend in American prisons, going by a 2013 study by the National Institute of literacy that said 63% of American prisoners are illiterate, and therefore a similar problem to be addressed. Although there is no measure of how well messages were conveyed to prisoners before the radio service, there is NPR-curated data that supports the idea that NPR has a strong influence on the lives of inmates: according to a 2013 “Impact

Snapshot” published on the NPR website, in 2013 NPR produced and aired a three-month campaign to promote the Department for Work and Pension’s prison Work Programme. According to inmate surveys, the percentage of inmates aware of the program rose from 30% to 80% and the percentage of inmates who reported that they were likely to sign up for the program rose from 40% to 70%. In response to a one-month campaign addressing alcoholism, 32% of inmates who heard the campaign said they acted on it, either by filling out an Addaction alcohol survey in the Inside Time paper or seeking out help. The report also found that 84% of prisoners listen to NPR, 57% listen every day, and 69% reported “NPR has made me think about making a positive change to my life.”

Funding

As Chief Executive, Maguire manages the strategic direction of the Prison Radio Association (PRA), the charity that employs outside NPR staff, oversees and funds UK prison radio and offers council to prisons around the world that want to develop prison radio projects. The Director of Development, or the person in charge of keeping PRA fully funded, is Vicky Rouse. According to Rouse, NPR does not receive significant funding from the government anymore, but the service is based on a £2 million Ministry of Justice fund secured by former Secretary of State for Justice Jack Straw (in addition to some funding allocated by HMP Brixton’s governor to expand the station), to connect all HMPs and six private prisons by installing satellite receivers in every one. According to the Justice Ministry, the funding was approved after it had been decided to keep inmates locked in their cells for a larger part of the day to conserve spending. The Ministry of Justice clarified its decision in a 2009 *Daily Mail* article after facing

criticism from conservative, and notably framed NPR as a tool to communicate rehabilitation-related messages to inmates, not as a rehabilitative service itself:

“A Justice Ministry spokesman said: 'The new prison core day, which saves the prison service £17 million a year, means prisoners spend more time in their cells. The prison service national radio service will allow us to communicate messages and educational programmes to them during this time, and while they are working in the prison. It can also be used to communicate to prisoners in the event of an incident.'”²

Even with the initial funding from the government, funding PRA is a huge responsibility. Much of the funding comes from some of the rehabilitation-inclined British grant-giving trusts, which Rouse has to constantly apply to—around 60 trusts have given to PRA since 2007.

As NPR has gotten older and lost its novelty, it has become harder and harder for Rouse to secure money from these trusts, so Rouse has begun to sell advertising space on NPR shows (ads now constitute about 25% of PRA’s funding). She sells much of the space to government departments advertising services useful to former inmates reintegrating into society, such as advertisements for the Department for Work and Pensions about applying for disability and unemployment, advertisements about using the NHS Direct health service to see a general practitioner rather than seeing an emergency room doctor, and advertisements about bail support and accounting services. To these organizations, Rouse said, the ad money spent on NPR isn’t frivolous: “Prisoners need to know about these services or they gets defunded.”

² "Con Air: Radio Station for Prisoners to Cost Taxpayers £2million." Mail Online. Associated Newspapers, 20 Jan. 2009. Web. 28 May 2015.

Jimmy & Julian

As I was only in prison for a limited time, the interviews I conducted with inmates were short and mostly focused on the details of their employment at NPR. As I was only allowed a pen and pad, I often wasn't able to quote them completely. Seeking a more holistic view of NPR and the inmates who produce it, I asked Phil to connect me with a couple former inmates who were involved in NPR. The ones I ended up getting in touch with were Jimmy Batchelor and Julian Mullins. Both served sentences at HMP Brixton and were released within the last couple years, Batchelor moving up to Derby in the East Midlands and Jimmy to Dorset on the south west coast of England. I visited them both in their cities and talked with them for many hours, much of which I recorded. I will introduce them in this section, including descriptions of their crimes and entry into prison for context, and use their testimony throughout the rest of this paper.

Julian Mullins

Having grown up in Ireland, Mullins became a lawyer when he was young. A few years ago, he developed a cocaine addiction and started stealing from his firm to subsidize his drug purchases. The heads of the firm found out, fired him, and, Julian assumed, reported him to the authorities. He then waited for six months in his home, which was about to be repossessed, "waiting for the police to come a-knocking." But nobody came for him. Because of his crime, he couldn't apply for another job in his city, and he figured they'd swept his offense under the carpet, so he arranged to start teaching English in Thailand. Two weeks later after arriving in Bangkok, he received news that he was wanted by the British police. Once he could afford to buy a ticket to return to London, he flew back and was arrested on the plane at Heathrow Airport by

armed police, though he didn't have any history of violence. In December 2012, he was locked up in HMP Wormwood Scrubs prior to his sentencing:

“I was actually in Wormwood Scrubs before, five or six years previous, as a lawyer seeing a client in the prison. I just never thought I'd be back there on the other side of the wall. I was on C-wing in Wormwood Scrubs, and it's the biggest prison wing of any prison in Europe. There's I think four or five hundred prisoners on one wing... And you've got people who are drug addicts, you've got people on remand, which means people who are awaiting sentencing, so you've got every type. In that place, you're in with murderers, rapists, pedophiles—it's just an assault on your senses. You see people spitting methadone out of their mouth into a container and then selling it to somebody for tobacco... There's a lot of violence, a lot of fighting. I've seen people getting stabbed in the shower.”

After three months, he was sentenced to three years in prison for fraud and soon transferred to Brixton, a prison that, in his mind, was “pretty dingy, pretty horrible like they all are.” He took the media production course with Sylvia, and afterwards Chris Impey convinced him to join the NPR team. At the time, a prison officer who hosted the Rock Show was getting ready to leave asked Mullins to take over for him, in addition to the other shows that Mullins recorded. After a short time, it became the second most written-to show on NPR, and Mullins learned that the “Rock Show family” members were quite attentive:

“The people who write into the rock show are fanatics. They've got so much passion for the music, and it's a savior to these people in prisons. They write in very detailed letters about bands and what they like and what they don't like and commenting on the songs... Slipknot was a very popular band, and I cut off two Slipknot songs short in the same show, and I was absolutely ruined for that. Prisoners writing in and saying, 'Julian, you can't do this, it's complete sacrilege. You cannot cut off Slipknot ever again.'”

During his time at NPR, Mullins interviewed many politicians and authors, but one of his most powerful interviews was his first, a conversation with Eva Schloss, Anne

Frank's stepsister and a Holocaust survivor who lived at Auschwitz. After the interview, Mullins said, Schloss told him it had been better than the BBC's. Mullin's was overwhelmed, as he had worked very hard preparing for it:

“You try to give the audience some kind of perspective about the position that they're in. They think that it's uncomfortable, which it is, they think that it's unfair, which in some cases it may be. Then you try to give them a story about someone who's had it much worse.”

Excerpt of the Prime Time interview with Eva Schloss:

Mullins: “Can you possibly help us to visualize what it was like to live, if I can use that expression, in one of those camps, and what was a typical day for you?”

Schloss: “You got up in the morning when it was still dark, four o'clock. You just went outside, very, very tired. And you had the roll call, which meant you stand in rows of five. That took about two hours. Then you got your breakfast, which was a mug with some liquid. Then you were taken to different work parties, which was very, very heavy physical work digging trenches, carrying boulders, emptying latrines. And you did this from six, seven o'clock in the morning 'til late at night without a break. No food, no toilet, no nothing. And then you got your ration of bread. Then you entered your barrack completely exhausted, slept in a very narrow little place infested with lice and bedbugs and rats, and you tried to sleep. And that was day in, day out. You didn't know what day of the week it was, you didn't know what season it was. Every day's the same.”

Mullins: “Surely there must have been occasions when you thought you were going to be one of those people who was chosen to be sent to the gas chambers. How do you deal, emotionally, how do you foster any remnant of hope?”

Schloss: And this was hanging above our heads, that we could die. You just hoped you wouldn't be a victim.

“Even though I was in prison, I felt free in that time I was in [the studio],” Mullins told me. But even as he was becoming a skilled radio producer and expanding his passionate fan base within the system, Mullins was enduring terrible loss. In addition to missing two Christmases and his sister's wedding, he told his mother that he was in Thailand

during his entire prison sentence. When I talked to Mullins, he was waiting for his probation officer to give him permission to visit home at Christmas, during which he hopes to finally tell his mother the truth.

Jimmy Batchelor

Jimmy Batchelor is an IT teacher and rapper who goes by the handle Reggiimental. A few years back, he became involved in a money-making scheme with other musicians through which their music was bought on iTunes with the details of thousands of compromised credit cards (they were able to fly under the radar for a while because, since they were only charging 79 pence per song, no flags were raised). They were caught in 2009, yielding a memorable headline in *The Daily Mail*— “Amazon and iTunes DJ fraudsters jailed after they sold as many tracks as Madonna in £1m swindle”³—and Batchelor was sentenced to two years in prison in 2012.

Like Mullins, Batchelor spent a few months in HMP (or as he sometimes calls it, “HM Pizzle”) Wandsworth before being transferred to Brixton—a familiar institution from watching chef Gordon Ramsey’s cooking show based in the prison. One day, after writing constantly to Chris Impey, he came to Batchelor’s cell and asked for some references. Batchelor found a guard who looked over his spotless record and endorsed him to NPR.

Batchelor’s first on-air responsibility was to take over production of the Album Show, a program on which he would dissect classic albums track by track, analyzing them in any way he wanted. He excelled at this, and his very first show about Amy

3 Seales, Rebecca. "Amazon and iTunes DJ Fraudsters Jailed after They Sold as Many Tracks as Madonna in £1m Swindle." Mail Online. Associated Newspapers, 30 Mar. 2012. Web. 28 May 2015.

Winehouse's album *Frank* caught the attention of Andrew Wilkie, the Director of Radio and Operations:

“I sat there with some nice headphones on and put together this Amy Winehouse show. To come to Brixton prison and then get access to it, have a chance to listen to it, break it down, put together a piece of material that showcases how I feel about it. It was great, man, it was the best release I could have imagined. It took me about five minutes to work it out. I was making shows and I was doing the news and I was reading the TV guide. And it made my time in Brixton go really quickly. Because it was regimented—there's a whole approach to staying busy. Even by the time I left the radio station I'm taking work back to the cell and I'm planning an album show for tomorrow.”

Now that Batchelor has been out of prison for a while, he is making music again and has founded MPR Derby, a hip-hop centric multi-media (including radio) training course for young adults.

The Shows

HMP Brixton

Bob & Beyond

“Very, very popular music in prison, reggae music,” Maguire told me. “Really uplifting and empowering and fun, and full of escapism and redemption and all of that.” But it became clear after a minute of talking to Steve, the inmate who had taken over at the helm of Bob & Beyond three weeks earlier, that there is probably another reason reggae music is so popular in prison—its hosts. A contrast to the many young men who produce for NPR, Steve is a bit older with a calming Jamaican Patois, an easy sense of humor, and a uniquely peaceful way of processing his prison experience: “Everyone goes to jail at some point,” he said, pointing out that producing radio is a relatively charmed way to spend ones day in prison and that time flies away inside the station unlike anywhere else. He partially credits his outlook to his prolific correspondence through four-page letters and phone calls with his many family members on the outside: “I must be the *champion* letter writer of this prison.”

Inmate producers are not referred to by their full names or DJ names, Maguire told me, but as producers who broadcast under their real first names in order to prevent them from gaining celebrity status within the prison. However, Steve enjoys a decent level of recognition around the prison from listeners. He likes using radio to feed music and information into “a little world in a world of their own,” but considers it pity that people outside the prison can’t hear his programs. That may change eventually, as Steve says he’s been so satisfied by his radio work on the inside that he may try to start a

reggae radio station in his family home of Jamaica when he's released: "Everything happens for a reason, and this could be the reason I'm here."

Every Friday, along with younger inmate producer Kyle, Steve goes into the studio to record vocal introductions and conversations about the program's reggae and dancehall selection. Steve also contributes to the Prime Time show, and during October he was producing a series of audio profiles for Black History Month of famous black Britons. When I sat down with him, he was busy combing through research downloaded by outside staff to write a radio script about the life and times of Linton Kwesi Johnson, a British-Jamaican dub poet.

"It's a privileged job," Steve told me. And with 80,000 potential listeners, he says, "It's a big responsibility to make good content. Everyone listens...child molesters or whatever. So it's got to be clean."

Coming up with the track list isn't difficult for Steve, as his knowledge of reggae and dancehall is nearly unparalleled, but he's learned that being a show host means a lot more than selecting a cohesive arrangement of tracks. He often listens to outside FM radio to get new ideas about how to speak on air and is constantly requesting new music for his shows to be downloaded onto the station's limited database and vetted for illicit content—"yeah, they've got it sorted," he says wryly.

Prime Time

When I entered the HMP Brixton radio station for the first time, I was determined to minimize the "Observer Effect," or the amount of influence my presence would have on the natural goings-on at the station. By my second morning at Brixton, it was apparent that my desire to be a fly on the wall only represented my lack of

understanding of prison life and the purpose of NPR. I was surprised that nearly everyone in the station seemed happy to see me. “Ben!” Steve said. “Everybody’s friend.” The guys all laughed and agreed that that was my new nickname.

Later that morning, Nancy Prentice, who oversees Prime Time, asked me if I would like to be an interview guest on a special show her, Steve, and Kyle were making about the American prison system. I agreed without a second thought. I sat in the studio with Steve and an inmate producer named Carl looking down at their scripts and Prentice controlling the recording equipment and mixing software (Adobe Audition). They played clips of an interview Carl did with a British justice scholar about his time in American prisons and then used the clips to bring up large issues in the American prison system. The first segment was about the disproportionate number of black people that are locked up in American prisons. Then they turned to me and asked me why that was the case.

As I began to make thinking noises (which they assured me they would iron out of the final audio), I realized two things: one, I hadn’t just gained access to the NPR station for my own research needs. I was one of many journalists inside the station, and to them I had a perspective to tap and a voice to use. And two, Steve was right—broadcasting on NPR is a huge responsibility. It wasn’t live, and my answers would not garner praise or ridicule beyond the prison walls. But prison is a closed system, not a black hole. At the other end of the microphone were potentially tens of thousands of people who have more time to process media than most populations. Not to mention that the distinction between an inmate and a free citizen is fleeting—almost all NPR listeners will soon return to the outside world.

I managed not to make a fool of myself. I mentioned the documented tendency of police officers around the United States, particularly in the South, to police neighborhoods of different racial makeup with different levels of scrutiny and force, and answered the rest of their questions in a similarly vague way. Interestingly, Carl and Steve's lack of interview experience seemed to be more of a benefit than a hindrance to them, as they condensed the chatter of a normal interview down to a statement of fact and a pointed question.

The Love Bug

The Love Bug show is an ingeniously simple concept—to provide all the inmates who are “banged up” at night (the show plays at 10 in the evenings) with a romantic soundtrack that's meant to facilitate the writing of letters to loved ones. As a naturally wordy, charismatic guy, Simon was the perfect host for it, artfully skating the line between schmaltz and tongue-in-cheek humor. He was excited to have my “yankee voice” dictate a new set of “jingles” (show promos that would air during different programs) for the Love Bug. After he had escorted me into Studio B inside the Brixton station, he gave me a lengthy script that described in sultry terms the importance of keeping close written contact with those on the outside and when to listen in. As I spoke, he mixed in the R&B song “Four Page Letter” by Aaliyah, bobbing his head and coaching me through the script. I could tell he thought my voice sounded a bit high and grating on air, but he was nice enough to compliment my delivery as he quickly edited the sound file by looking at the waveforms. Within a minute, he was finished, and my voice in the jingle sounded considerably more confident than it had been.

HMP Coldingley

HMP Coldingley, a sprawling prison complex on the edge of Bisley built in 1969, more closely resembled the dull American prisons I've seen than HMP Brixton. The security was also noticeably heightened, as I was searched and patted down both days I went in unlike at Brixton. And as opposed to Brixton, where the radio station is near the center of the complex, the radio station at Coldingley is located past some ironic palm trees and through a large concrete yard on the second floor of a large vocational building.

The station was in a transitional period when I visited. The original idea for the Coldingley station was different than the Brixton model, and was intended to maximize the number of inmates that would gain radio production skills and experience: ten inmates at a time would simultaneously take a radio production course and start producing shows for broadcast, and at the end of the course another wave of ten inmates would begin the cycle. Unexpectedly, however, the audio production teacher left, leaving a Brixton-esque group of four producing inmates and Alex Bishop, Arthur Hagues, and Chris Impey (two days a week) to oversee them.

The Poet in Residence Segment with Chris Preddy

Every week, Arthur Hagues of the Coldingley station goes out for an on-the-street recording session with Chris Preddy, who grew up aiming to be a criminal but decided to go to school for theatre instead and now works as an activist and mentor to inspire particularly young men in prison to stay away from crime. Since summer 2014 he has been NPR's "poet in residence," and uses the recording sessions to travel to places of personal significance with Hagues and rap a new poem about various

inspirational topics. On the day I accompanied them, we walked around Chris' old college campus in North London where he studied drama. From my brief observation, it seemed that the segment was a way to showcase Preddy's charisma and positivity and to stimulate inmates' interest in poetry. His poem was a very dramatic piece that he had written that morning about his unexpected path to college—"was gonna be a baller, got into drama"—and why it is an important to have a mentor to help you out of dark places, ending with the line, "the life of a mentor...there is no end." After Preddy's third take, Hagues was clearly pleased—"that's all juice, man!"

Sport Heavy

The first inmate I talked to at the Coldingley station was Ibrahim, the pioneering producer of Sport Heavy, NPR's first sports show. In order to start producing for NPR, inmates had to describe what kind of show they wanted to produce and why. As a sports nut who spent much of his time in his cell watching one of the five channels to feature sports, he pitched a show that would provide play analysis, match previews, betting odds, and an international sports roundup. His pitch was accepted, and he now produces it weekly, drawing about sixty percent of his material from the TV sports channel and forty percent from articles that the outside staff download for him.

Like Simon, Ibrahim thought that my American accent might give his jingles a new appeal, so once again we headed into Coldingley's recording studio. He had me record a number of hilariously similar variations on the phrase, "you're listening to Sport Heavy, the heaviest, weightiest sports show on National Prison Radio," pausing after every recitation to think about how I could alter my tone and the words to pack the most punch. Before I left the studio, he also had me record a bit for his running Favorite

Sports Moment segment, where he asked various people in the prison to describe their “number one heaviest sports moment,” something that they either witnessed or were a part of. He recorded me as I told him about how existentially validated I felt, and how magical it was for me and my friends when Shaun White won the Olympic Half Pipe Gold in 2010 with a Double McTwist 360. My story was long and windy, and when I finished I could tell by the look in his eyes that he wouldn’t be using it—he’s got a responsibility to his listeners.

The next day when I entered the station, Ibrahim was glowing. He had received his first piece of fan mail from a listener. “I’m happy about that,” he said, gesturing at the letter. “I thought it was never going to come.” It was indeed a heartwarming note, filled with praise, support, and a few Sport Heavy references that only Ibrahim would understand: “I listen to you on my swanky telly & throw out a few combos.” It reminded me of something Rupert, an inmate producer at Brixton, told me when I asked him what he thought was the most important thing NPR provides inmates: “Most people here have been told they’re shit at everything. What they need is for someone to tell them they’re good at something.”

The Gospel Show

Before he went to prison, Warren, the passionate presenter behind Coldingley’s Gospel Show, wasn’t religious and had always dismissed Gospel music as boring. But he became friends with a man on the inside who convinced Warren to read the Bible, and it wasn’t long until he considered himself a deeply religious Christian. When he saw that the radio station was accepting applications, he saw a unique opportunity to “reach out to people,” and wrote a pitch for a show that would use music to connect

Christians within the system. The show is meant to make people think twice who thought they knew Gospel, he says, by playing “the good news” through R&B and reggae and other contemporary genres.

He had originally planned for every show to climax with a “spirit charge” at the end, during which he would cut out the music and read a stirring spiritual quote followed by his own analysis. He would then mix directly into what he referred to as the “scorcher”, or the most uplifting track of the show. Unfortunately for Warren, NPR is partially funded by the government, so any evangelical content on NPR has to be severely toned down. In recent weeks, Hagues told me, outside producers had worked with Warren to craft his spirit charge into more of a philosophical moment.

Warren isn’t particularly bothered by the secularization of his show, as he understands the position the outside producers are in, and is ultimately satisfied with the impact his show is having—there are a few inmates around Coldingley who listen regularly, and that’s all he said he could ask for. “I only need one listener,” he said. Considering that he’s in a prison, he told me, he is relatively content—he enjoys his job (“The time goes so quick, it’s like I’m not even in prison”), he appreciates how mellow the long-sentence inmates in Coldingley are (“I prefer to be around lifers ‘cause they don’t do your head in”) and likes the fact that his cell has a self-contained shower and toilet and thick walls so he can zone out to NPR without any ambient noise. Now that he’s on good terms with a few prison officers as well as the NPR staff, “it’s like a family,” he said. “Officers know me, know my nature.”

The Coldingley Hour

Part 1: On my second day at Coldingley, I went with Alex Bishop as he went to out into the prison yard go record a segment for Saturday's twelfth Coldingley Hour, Coldingley's localized request show and news program. That day, he wanted to make a piece about a recycling program called Inside Donations. As Bishop explained, when inmates leave the prison, everything they own in prison has to be dumped off their property cards, which means that they have to either take their possessions or throw them away. A few inmates had created a formal proposal for the governor to establish a system where departing inmates could instead dump off their old clothes and possessions in a bin, which these inmates would then wash and clean and then put out for any inmates in need. The governor accepted the proposal and allocated the funds for the bin, so we went to go see the group of about 15 guys who made it happen and talk about the first load of recycled items.

Bishop is an empathetic, soft-spoken ex-BBC producer who started working for NPR on projects like a gay awareness program called Gay On the Inside with Stephen Fry. As it turned out, he was the perfect person to coax some of the inmates into being recorded, as there were none who were immediately willing to go on record about the program. Though Bishop didn't like pressuring inmates to be interviewed, he told me, it's very important that the Coldingley Hour is guided by inmates and not outside NPR producers. Initially he tried to convince a man named Clive, who had come up with the original idea, to be interviewed, but he kept on deflecting Bishop's requests by saying things like, "But I've got a television face, not a radio face." Soon other inmates started

lightly jeering Clive about not doing it, which Bishop tried to tamp down: “Settle down guys, let’s not put Clive on the spot.”

Eventually, Bishop found a willing inmate named Jaime and we all walked over to the wing where the bin was located next to the prison commissary. Bishop had Jaime explain the premise of the Inside Donations project into the microphone and described every piece of clothing he took out of the donations bin. He was flustered at first, but by the end he was giving Bishop some ideal sound bites: “That’s what Inside Donations is all about, giving to those who haven’t got much. It’s for people who’ve lost their ID in prison,” Jaime said, describing how an inmate who doesn’t have enough money to buy normal clothes to replace the stock prison clothes could find the program very useful. He then thanked the governor for approving the project and signed off.

When Jaime was done with the interview, many of the other inmates went up to him to give him encouragement and tell him that he would sound good on the radio. “Jaime, you’ve done well mate. I’m proud of you,” one inmate remarked. But even though Jaime seemed to feel confident about his performance, as he was signing an NPR release form he told Bishop that he didn’t want to be identified by name. Bishop was perplexed, but didn’t try to convince him otherwise. As we were walking out of the wing, I asked one of the inmates why everyone was so shy to be recorded, and why Jaime didn’t want his name going out. The inmate laughed and said simply, “If you’re living with 500 cons, you don’t want to come off like an arselicker!”

Part 2: When I sat down with Michael, an inmate producer who works on the Coldingley Hour, he was assembling a radio piece about how to deal as an inmate with the negative mental health effects of prisons, based on interviews he had done with a

mental health nurse and a local Samaritan. “Depression is an illness like a cold, but it’s even worse because it’s invisible, you can’t see it,” Michael said. He felt compelled to produce the segment because of his own experience being imprisoned. He had experienced a heavy breakup, was arrested and sent to prison (“the lowest of the low”) within a short period, and he said the loss of contact with his family finally pushed him over the edge into severe depression. “I wanted to raise awareness to erase the stigma around depression and mental illness,” he told me, “and inform those struggling that there’s an end to the tunnel.”

Next, I was approached by John, an inside producer who serves as the principal interviewer for the Coldingley Hour, and it wasn’t hard to see why. He had the friendly presence and quick wit of a late night host, and he said he wanted to “prep” me for an interview he wanted to do with me about my thesis project. We talked for a few minutes about the recent history of the prison system and once it seemed he felt I was ready to have a comfortable conversation he led me to the studio and gave me a pair of headphones. I was unnerved to find that his interview style was similar to the blunt questioning I had experienced at Brixton:

John: “So, Ben, after your time at Brixton and here in Coldingley, tell me, would prison radio work in the America? Will you be able to start a similar system? And if so, how?”

After a long pause, I said that I didn’t know. If my trip up to that point had shown me anything, it was that I was surprised it had worked at all. If it does happen, I told him and his audience, it’s likely got to be incremental and regional. Regional, because the US is so huge compared to the UK that it’ll be much harder to tailor content to prisoners in regards to differences in the justice/prison systems, varying racial tensions, accents,

etc. And incremental, because will be so difficult to find support and funding, even in ways that it wasn't in the UK—no universal television installations to use as NPR streaming outlets, a splintered prison system governed by different bodies, prison systems that are even more strapped for money than British prisons. But I was hopeful, I said. After a long line of hard questions about what I thought of NPR and why I was there, John thanked me and closed the audio file.

Outside In

During my second week around London, I went to the beautiful, glossy BBC Broadcasting House in the heart of London to attend a recording of *Outside In*, a show produced by a BBC producer that revolves around a discussion between former HMP inmates. It's part of NPR's effort to make NPR into a wraparound service that gives inmates practical advice on different aspects of prison life and what to expect on the outside.

The show I sat in on was a conversation about maintaining relationships while inside. The five former inmates (three guys and two women) did a good job of keeping the session lighthearted with jokes and sunny segue songs, but the subject matter was generally dark. A guy named Bradley talked about his experience in prison with kids on the outside; how he thought of them every moment, and how different his relationships with them were when he got out—his son had begun to idolize him, while his daughter had distanced herself. He described his current home at a probation hostel, and lamented the effect his incarceration has had on his whole family: “My family are serving sentences of their own now.”

Much of the session consisted of someone telling a story and other inmates leapfrogging the underlying point. A woman named Julia talked about how she re-forged her relationship with her partner after her release by giving him a lot of space: “You can’t just expect things are going to be the same when you get out.”

“Actions speak louder than words,” another former inmate said, encouraging inmates to make bold gestures to demonstrate the ways in which they’ve changed when they’re released. “You can say sorry ‘til the cows come home, but it ain’t until they see it.”

Everyone agreed that writing letters is the best way to keep contact with loved ones while in prison. One former inmate said that letters don’t just show persistence, but they’re more healing than prison visits, which can be very emotional and draining. And it’s an incomparable feeling, another former inmate added, “after a long day to get back to your cell and just see [letters] sitting there.” In addition, he said, it’s a way to find out who is truly dedicated to you on the outside. “You realize who your friends are in prison,” he said. “Lots of friends kind of drift away during long sentences.”

The Station Review

The station review, a periodic meeting when the inmates producers sit down with outside producers to discuss the current programming schedule and ideas for the future, seemed essential in helping inmates carry out their vision for the station. The review I observed occurred bright and early on my second morning at HMP Brixton. It was the first time I had seen all of the station members interact with each other, and the atmosphere was considerably more rowdy than the previous day. The inmates were clearly comfortable speaking candidly around Chris Impey and Nancy Prentice, the

outside producers facilitating the review, and most seemed keen to have a level-headed discussion.

Much of the conversation concerned the lineup of shows and how it could mesh more effectively with the schedules and routines of HMP Brixton residents. One inmate argued that the good television shows are on in the early morning and that it's only until afterwards that inmates decide to switch on NPR. More specifically, Steve added, "Wednesday is a dead day for telly," and as such would be a good day to play a rerun of *Bob & Beyond*. The inmates spent a few moments debating the best time to listen to reggae—one said it eases the waking up process, another steadfastly asserted that it is perfect nighttime cool-down music. An inmate described an affirming experience from the day before: as he walked down the hallway in his wing to his cell, in every cell he passed inmates were tuned and listening to NPR. Next, outside producer Natalie Wright suggested that inmates get involved in the process of "clearing" songs for NPR radio play to free up some time for her and the other outside producers (in order to clear a song, one has to make sure that it contains no drug or criminal references, and use editing software to reverse swear words and render them unrecognizable—a tedious process).

One inmate commented that, in anticipation of the next Governor's Questions segment to be recorded for *Brixton Calling* (HMP Brixton's monthly prison-specific news show), he was nervous to talk with the governor, or at least to say what he means in front of him, for fear of consequences. Governor's Questions is perhaps the most surprising premise of any NPR program—it is a segment in which the Brixton governor comes to the radio station to answer a few questions sent in from prisoners from an

inmates producer. According to Rouse, the governor Edmond Tullett loves participating because it gives him a direct channel to the ears of inmates to describe new opportunities in the prison, hear inmates' grievances, and translate prison jargon for them. Rouse says that these kinds of interviews are empowering for the inmates who conduct them, and that it gives listening inmates a sense that the governor is accountable. NPR also occasionally hosts interviews with other members of the Prison Service, such as when Julian Mullins interviewed the Prisons Minister:

“When I was interviewing the Prisons Minister, I felt that I was the voice of the entire prison population and I had to ask him questions which everyone was feeling, about the change in the regime and why it was happening. And you have to try and do it in a diplomatic fashion, but you still want to get the feeling that you're acting for the prisoners and you're not simply being a yes man for the politicians.”

Moving on, Chris mentioned that they needed to cater more shows and packages to the inmates in the women's prisons that they broadcast to (there are 13 women's prisons in England and none in Wales). “A majority of the work I do is for the women,” Simon said dryly. “He kills me, bruv!” another inmate laughed. It may have been an inside joke, as the whole room erupted in hysterics that seemed disproportionate to how funny the comment was. Or, in a men's prison in a prison system that doesn't allow conjugal visitation, it could also have been an indicator of the deprivation of sexual and romantic connections that many inmates endure. In any case, Chris was not amused, and urged them to settle down to finish the meeting. He asked them if they had any ideas for people they could try to get into the Brixton studio to interview in the next month. “Charlie Sloth,” an inmate replied, to more chuckles (Charlie Sloth is the stout, boisterous DJ of BBC Radio 1's The Rap Show).

Rupert had some complaining to do. He said that he was annoyed that many of the songs on the request shows and the pop shows were the same: “It gets a bit much to hear a tune four times a day!” Prentice agreed, but argued that it might not be something they can fix, as the repeated songs on the request shows might be of special significance to couples in the system.

Finally, Chris asked if there were any ideas for new shows. Steve suggested a program to feature older tunes and artists, as opposed to the bulk of NPR’s programming that focuses on genres that appeal to younger inmates (dancehall, pop, rap, grime, and various forms of UK dance music), in order to connect with middle-aged and elderly inmates. Reaching out to older age groups is an important idea that I heard mentioned several times by outside producers—according to the UK’s Prison Reform Trust, between 2002 and 2014 there was an increase of 146% in the number of inmates aged 60 and over, and an increase of 122% in the number of inmates aged 50-59.

Chris then asked the guys what they thought about doing a yoga show, with music and guiding words to facilitate yoga sessions for those in their cells. “That sounds rubbish!” cracked one of the inmates. “You need to open your mind,” Chris said sternly.

The Outside Staff Meeting

At the end of my final day in Brixton, I attended NPR’s monthly meeting for outside producers and executives. Though it was mostly a dry and analytical discussion, besides a divisive debate over where to hold the annual NPR Christmas party, it gave me a view into how singularly determined producers are to make an impact, and what a

complex job it is to do that while managing relationships with the inmate producers, the governors at the prisons where NPR produces, and the outside media.

One of the hot topics was the staff situation inside the Brixton station. At HMP Brixton, D category prisoners (prisoners incarcerated for minor offenses or nearing the end of their sentences) are encouraged to find work outside the prison while still spending nights inside Brixton and are allowed temporary periods home leave. But due to an HMP Brixton procedural change that stated D category inmates *must* work at a job outside the prison during the day if they want to have home leave, some inmate producers had recently left the station. This not only left an immediate hole in the NPR programming schedule but made it difficult to recruit qualified inmates, as many were also compelled to work outside. The new group of guys at the station had proven tiring for the outside producers who were used to the workflow of the former producers. Nancy Prentice reported that Rupert had just received a warning for misconduct inside the station, and said she was exhausted by how much time it took to corral them around.

NPR has been dealing with this problem in different ways for a while now, though, as Phil Maguire told me the first time we talked:

“It’s always great when we find out that somebody’s successfully been released; that they’re doing well on the outside, but occasionally it’s very difficult for us. At best, we have the same group for three months, and it feels quite stable. Then sometimes within the space of three or four weeks, we can lose almost all of the prisoners. And you can imagine what impact that has, because they’re the key to the station. They’re our talent.”

The only thing to do, Director of Radio and Operations Andrew Wilkie said, was to make sure that the structure of the station and the established set of shows was what made NPR able to weather staff turnovers. While the strength of the presenter is the

most important factor on outside radio, he said, the most important factor for NPR is the strength of its format. However, when inmates who have established popular shows leave, it is still very difficult to find replacement hosts who have similar interests and skills. Jamie, a kind, soft-spoken inmate producer, was approaching release, and the outside staff did not know who they could enlist to take over NRG and Drum & Space, Jamie's dance music programs.

It is something that distinguishes NPR from a commercial media station—the fact that even as it grows, it is relatively unstable by design. Every year it has to reapply to grant-giving trusts, and every few months its inmate producers are gone. While staff members reported a new show in the works at HMP Styal about women-specific issues and newfound popularity for NPR at HMP Coldingley, we also heard that the limited NPR project at HMP Hindley was no more—the funding was gone.

On the bright side, Wilkie said, they had compiled the numbers from the listener surveys they had given to inmates recently. “Inmate surveys about programming were heartening,” Wilkie said. “Except the one that said, ‘It is shit.’”

Next on the agenda staff members wanted to address the dilemma they faced recently when former inmates have requested access to shows they recorded while in prison. One former inmate wanted some radio clips to apply to a BBC apprenticeship. This wasn't a simple issue to Maguire, who firmly believed that they had to maintain control over their recorded content that not everyone could get permission. If NPR shows start circulating on the outside, he said, it could undermine one of the fundamental aspects of NPR—that it is a by prisoner, for prisoner service. As a

temporary solution to inmates requesting old show files, Sophie the intern had been helping inmates make demo tapes before they left the station.

Finally, they addressed the constant barrage of media inquiries the station had been receiving—about 2 per week. Over the years, Impey had told me earlier, many different parties have approached NPR hoping to produce movies and other projects based on the story of NPR. Maguire’s directions: channel all calls from media to him. The trick, he said, is to be proactive, but not responsive. “We’ve always been media shy, and always should be,” Maguire said. “Our job is not to sway public opinion.” Maguire argued that NPR needs just enough publicity to convey a positive image to the public—such as publicizing winning Gold at the Sony Radio Academy Awards—but otherwise keeping a low profile and doing good work.

NPR has long been under the scrutiny of the right-wing press in England, to whom the concept of prison radio only seems to strengthen their characterization of UK prisons as “holiday camps,” bent on pampering inmates with no regard for effective punishment or fiscal responsibility. In February 2015, David Barrett of *The Telegraph* wrote:

“Despite steps to reduce access to satellite television and computer games, concerns remain that inmates still have access to facilities that many law-abiding members of the public could not afford. A new cellblock opened at a privately-run jail in south Wales last month boasting a well-equipped gym – which in the outside world would cost upwards of £20 a month to join.”⁴

4 Barrett, David. "Concerns over 'holiday Camp' Jails." *The Telegraph*. Telegraph Media Group, 11 Feb. 2015. Web. 1 May 2015.

Several times during my trip, NPR outside producers drearily used the term “con air” in explaining why NPR is low publicity by necessity. It’s a reference to an article published in January 2009 by the conservative tabloid newspaper *Daily Mail* titled, “Con Air: Radio station for prisoners to cost taxpayers £2million.” After describing the costs of what was then called Electric Radio Brixton and the government’s rationale for recently funding the radio infrastructure, the article goes on:

“Shadow justice minister Edward Garnier said he would prefer prisoners to be working rather than lying on their beds listening to messages. He told *The Sun*: 'The Government has presided over the worst prison overcrowding in the history of the Prison Service. Now it tries to pretend pumping radio programmes into cells makes everything all right. It would be comic if it were not so tragic.'”⁵

Five months later, *The Guardian* published a story in which Paul McDowell, then governor of HMP Brixton, was quoted responding strongly to *The Daily Mail*'s position at the 2009 Radio Festival in Nottingham:

“My primary role is to protect it from attacks from the likes of the *Daily Mail*,” McDowell said. ‘I am a prison governor and half of my life is spent managing the politics of prisoners. One of the things I am not going to do is put Ian Huntley on a radio station to deliver a programme every week. That is opening us up [to attack] and if we get criticised for that then we might end up losing the whole thing.’

‘We have to make a choice – do we chuck people in a prison that does nothing with them, offers them no support, and makes no effort to rehabilitate them? If that's what we want, then that's fine, don't have radio stations, don't have educational departments, just keep churning out people who commit more crime,’ he told the Radio Festival.”⁶

5 “Con Air: Radio Station for Prisoners to Cost Taxpayers £2million.”

6 Plunkett, John. “Brixton Prison Radio 'a Daily Mail Story Waiting to Happen', Says Governor.” *The Guardian*. *Guardian News*, 30 June 2009. Web. 1 May 2015.

According to Siobhann Tighe, the Head of Prison Radio for the National Offender Management Service and a BBC staff member, NPR's strategy of declining media opportunities has put it in an ideal position: "Prison radio is right under the radar when it comes to the public, and it suits us that it has a low-profile. Politicians who know about it are very supportive and understand its value. The last Prison's Minister, Andrew Selous, was a big fan."

Context for prison radio

The Listening Community

In British prisons, inmates are strictly forbidden from accessing the Internet. Every cell has a television with outside channels, and inmates are allowed to have radios, video games, and even laptops. But inmates are not just forbidden from surfing the Internet—when inmate producers in HMP Brixton or Coldingley approach the glass-walled office of the outside producers, screens are turned off or away to prevent them from seeing even a glimpse. According to the Prisoner Communication Services instruction from the Ministry of Justice, it is even forbidden for an inmate to allow someone on the outside to update their social network profile while they're locked up.

This is not out of the ordinary. American, Canadian, Philippino, and Ukrainian inmates are the few inmate populations to permit inmates to use the Internet, albeit in an extremely limited capacity, while only Norwegian inmates have relatively free access to it. But the fact that a prison sentence now means an extended period without access to online news and information, social networks and other online communities should not be taken lightly. According to a 2012 report by the UK's Prison Reform Trust, though 18-25 year olds (an age group for whom the Internet is an integral part of life) make up one tenth of the UK population, they constitute one third of those sent to prison every year.⁷ In 2011, the U.N. stated that Internet access is a universal human right, and this February in the *Washington Post* Ben Branstretter articulated a fiery argument for expanded Internet access in prison:

⁷ Old Enough to Know Better: A Briefing on Young Adults in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales. London: Yolfa, 2012. Prison Reform Trust. Prison Reform Trust, Jan. 2012. Web. 1 May 2015.

“Prisoners do have freedom of speech — and isn’t access to the Internet an integral part of modern speech? By blocking convicts from even a censored version of the digital world, we’re denying them not just the ability to survive in a culture that has grown without them but also the ability to contend with life in prison. This isn’t about making prison cushy for prisoners — it’s about securing a fundamental human right for those most in need of it.”⁸

For the time being, inmates in British prisons live without Internet and without social networks, and what they access on laptops is limited to the files on their hard drives.

However, as NPR has grown in scope and popularity over the past few years, the listening community has grown into something that resembles a limited social network.

If an inmate lives in HMP Brixton or Coldingley, he (they are both men’s prisons) can communicate with inmate producers directly—before a request box was installed in the G-wing of Brixton, Steve of Bob & Beyond said that he used to carry a notebook with him wherever he went in order to write down song requests from other inmates who recognized him on his wing or in the hallways. For the inmates in the other 105 NPR-receiving prisons in the system, the only way to communicate with NPR is through pen and paper. In prisons, however, where inmates are used to using snail mail to communicate with the outside world, this is not a deterrent—in 2013 alone, inmates from around the country sent in 5,288 letters to the Brixton station.⁹

Every week, producers receive stacks of listener mail, some asking for a tune (to the dismay of producers, listeners disproportionately request a dark 2004 hip-hop song about imprisonment called “Locked Up” by Akon and Styles P) and some simply wanting a “shout-out”. Now littered throughout popular media, the term “shout-out”

⁸ Branstetter, Ben. “The Case for Internet Access in Prisons.” *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 9 Feb. 2015. Web. 28 May 2015.

⁹ “Prison Radio Association: Impact Snapshot 2013.” Prison Radio Association. Prison Radio Association, 2013. Web. 1 May 2015.

was coined in the 80s by hip-hop DJ Ralph McDaniels on his television show “Video Music Box,”¹⁰ and is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a brief expression of greeting or praise given especially on a broadcast or audio recording,”¹¹ Though brief, the shout-out requests that NPR receives are touching expressions of love and remembrance, often not completely decipherable to an outsider.

“Just want you 2 play a choon for me 4 a special person, they no who they are... safe 2 all ma E2 girlz,” wrote one inmate from a women’s prison, while another dedicated his shout-out to the “Derby B Burton lads on lockdown in the system”. Many letters seem to be dedicated to significant others in the prison system, based on either relationships formed on the outside or at a prison that one of them was transferred away from, and many of them focus on the future: “Miss you loads, soon be out doing our ting.” Or even simpler: “Big up my baby love.” (Comparable to “shout-out”, “big up” can be used as a noun and a verb and signifies respect for and acknowledgment of a person or thing. The phrase originated in Jamaican dancehall and reggae sound system culture and is now a widely popularized term in England and among Brixton and Coldingley inmate producers, many of whom are of Jamaican heritage.¹²)

Sometimes, as NPR chief executive Phil Maguire told me, the explanations behind songs can be quite serious:

“We had one woman write in—she was in prison, she made a really good friend in prison, they became close, best friends, they were both recovering heroine addicts. One of them was released, and within a couple of days of being released she was dead from a heroine overdose.

10 Stelloh, Tim. "Telling the Story of New York's Hip-Hop Scene, Clip by Clip." City Room: Blogging From the Five Boroughs. The New York Times, 12 Mar. 2012. Web. 28 May 2015.

11 "Shout-out." Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 28 May 2015.

12 Pettward, Jim. "Series 5: Big up." BBC Learning English. BBC, 21 Apr. 2009. Web. 28 May 2015.

So the surviving friend who was still in prison wrote to us to tell us how tragic this story was, and how lost and bereft she was, but really, it was a warning call to any other prisoners. You know, you can go to prison, you can stop taking your drugs, your tolerance level drops, you get out of prison, you go take your normal dose, but because you build up your tolerance over many years or many months, your normal dose is now a deadly dose. And so the letter that she wrote was really to try and warn other prisoners to be careful. I think she requested one of her friend's favorite songs, and said, 'Could we dedicate this song to the memory of my friend.'"

NPR can also connect British inmates with people on the outside through its website, which features a form that friends and relatives can use to submit a song request and a message to go along with it that NPR producers read on air. The website cites research that "suggests that having family ties can reduce the likelihood of reoffending by as much as 39%."¹³

NPR is not designed to be the primary way for inmates to communicate with inmates in other prisons or wings, and according to Alex Cavendish using illicit mobile phones and sending direct letters are well-established modes of communication:

"Illicit mobiles and prepaid SIM cards can be found on pretty much every prison wing outside of the high security (Cat A) estate. I knew of dozens in every prison I was in. Many of the actual handsets are smuggled in by prison staff, civilian workers or contractors in return for cash paid back in the community.

"Unless prisoners are co-defendants on remand prior to trial, there is usually no problem writing to each other. Whenever I moved prison, I used to continue writing to former cell-mates or friends I'd made. All you need is the prison address and their number."

Though NPR is not as efficient or private a tool of communication as these two methods, it is another social tool that inmates can use to become a part of a semi-public community or simply to keep a pulse on the prisons that NPR connects.

¹³ "MAKE A SONG REQUEST: The Family Request Show - Every Thursday on National Prison Radio." Prison Radio Association. Prison Radio Association, n.d. Web. 1 May 2015.

Like social networks, NPR also acts as a line between inmates and celebrity figures. One noteworthy program from the NPR archives that I listened to was based around an interview with hip-hop artist Nas, who phoned into the station for an interview about his collaboration album with Damian Marley. It's an impressive interview in many ways—the interview segments are well edited and segue seamlessly into music interludes, the inmate interview is bold and creative with his questioning while catering his questions to issues important to inmates, and Nas is clearly engaged:

Interviewer: “Another track off the album is “Count Your Blessings.” We know as well as you know that’s a great track and it’s uplifting. We also know that where there’s life there is hope. What would you say to us prisoners despite where we are that would uplift us and still give us belief that we are blessed?”

Nas: *Pause.* “You’re breathin’. You’re breathin’ and you’re alive. For so many people, that’s gone—that’s passed on. It’s up to you and nobody else is gonna care but you. No one’s gonna care for you like you gonna care. Mama love gonna care. She gonna care. Family gonna care. Your woman gonna care, your kids gonna care, whatever. Your homies got love. But you gotta care about you. You gotta take care of you. You gotta get out of that situation as safe as possible. You gotta keep you goin’. If you give up on you, there’s nothing nobody else can do. So don’t ever give up.”

Fades into “Count Your Blessings”.

The Glass Wall: Outside producers and inmate producers

The dynamic between inmate producers and outside producers is strikingly non-adversarial. The power hierarchy that exists in the stations seemed to be more a natural feature of a learning/production environment than of the power that outside producers ultimately have over inmates. Maguire put it more bluntly in a 2009 interview with *Time*: “In every prison in the UK, each room has an alarm bell. If you press the alarm

bell a couple of dozen burly officers storm in. We've been on air since November 2007 and never once had to press the alarm bell.”¹⁴

As an ambitious, pretty clearly beneficial rehabilitative media program, NPR mostly receives criticism about its existence, not how it operates. Such a program might seem like the least of a prison watchdog’s worries—one that teaches marketable skills and informs listening inmates. But there is no denying that NPR or a similar prison radio service would be an effective tool for disseminating state propaganda within the prison system—it broadcasts to every cell in receiving prisons, and most messages are dictated by inmates, which would lend state-written scripts authenticity. Kalen Churcher described a similar phenomenon in her 2008 dissertation about the production of the newspaper, shortwave FM radio station, and television channel at Louisiana State Penitentiary, arguing that “inmate-produced media serve a dual role as technologies of control (by the state) and (self)governance (by the inmates).”¹⁵ Then there’s the polar opposite concern that has been raised by almost everyone who I’ve talked to about this project—that NPR could be used as a tool by members of prison gangs to widen their grip on the prison system.

I brought these ideas up with Arthur Hagues, a recent journalism graduate of Falmouth University who had worked as an outside producer for NPR at HMP Coldingley for about half a year when we met. In response to the idea that gangs could infiltrate prison radio, he smiled and shook his head. It’s really not a serious concern, he said, when nothing is aired live and there are outside producers to vet all the content:

14 Harrell, Eben. "The Strange Success of Prison Radio." *Time*. Time Inc., 18 May 2009. Web. 1 May 2015.

15 Churcher, Kalen Mary Ann. "Self-Governance, Normalcy and Control: Inmate-Produced Media at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola." Diss. Pennsylvania State University, 2008. 212. Print.

“When you get a feeling that someone is trying to hijack a show, it’s easy to tell because you’re so on edge. If someone says something bad, you immediately know, if you get a little voice in your head, like, is it okay? It’s not okay.” But it can be nerve-wracking, Hagues said, to scan inmate’s shows in an environment where slang is so varied and obscure. In the past, he said, he came across a segment in which the inmate producer had said, “this goes out to all the Irish travelers, for all the needys.” (Irish travelers make up a traditionally nomadic ethnic group in Ireland and the UK) *Could that be a crime reference?* he thought at first. *A drug reference?* (According to Damian James le Bas, “needy” is “a verlanised form of the irish word ‘daoine,’ meaning ‘people.’”¹⁶) After some discussion, Hagues left the word in.

Former inmate producer Jimmy Batchelor agreed that it would be difficult to corrupt the content of NPR due to the tight editorial process and the savvy of the outside staff:

“The big bit is that it was all pre-recorded stuff, so it will need to be listened to thoroughly, and I know they had a protocol to go through. One person will listen to it, and another person will listen to it as a second person. I know Andrew [Wilkie] would always have his finger on the pulse. Andrew’s a white guy, standard 40 something—you’re probably not expecting him to be aware of a lot of the things, but he’s fully aware of all your slang terminology, all of your gang connotations that people are going to overlook, all of the ways that people address things without addressing things. He’s on it. You’ve got to have some people that are connected to the bottom layer of where people are talking.”

NPR has a license from Ofcom, the regulatory corporation that licenses all commercial radio and TV services in the UK. In addition to NPR’s policy of prohibiting any foul language to be broadcast and any nicknames, last names, or prisoner numbers, Ofcom

16 Martino, Alessandra De, Paolo Puppa, and Paola Toninato. *Differences on Stage*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013. 124. Print.

broadcasting guidelines prohibit the recruitment of followers to a religion, the encouragement of “the commission of crime or to lead to disorder” and “descriptions or demonstrations of criminal techniques which contain essential details which could enable the commission of crime.”¹⁷ For Hagues, this practically means staying away from much of the crime-centric hip-hop, grime, and dancehall that inmates request. For example, Hagues is dead tired of hearing requests for Vybz Kartel (who is coincidentally serving a life sentence in Jamaica for murder), a dancehall artist who was the second most requested artist on NPR in 2012.

Hagues was similarly unconvinced of the argument that NPR could be used as a mouthpiece for the government: “We have the ultimate say, but not in a sinister way. We’re just meant to be facilitators.” Hagues says that outside producers have a lot of obligations in term of shaping broadcasts, but the NPR guidelines mandate that ideas all come from the inmates. Hagues says he is mostly concerned with making sure inmates sound professional—cutting “ums” and “ahs” out of recordings, editing their scripts to make them more fluid, coaching inmates on maintaining an easy pace and correct pronunciation during recording sessions. Working at Coldingley, where NPR producers are still trying to grow a connection with their audience, Hagues also occasionally has to deal with larger issues, such as whether to cater shows to inmates who want to stay up to date with contemporary music or help feed nostalgia and comfort through older music programs. Hagues’ relationship with inmate producers is generally relaxed and respectful, with occasional awkwardness surrounding the fact that, at the end of the day,

¹⁷ "Section Three: Crime." Ofcom. Ofcom, n.d. Web. 28 May 2015.

only one of them will go home. Accordingly, conversations with inmates can only go so far: “I try not to bum them out by talking about what I’ve been up to.”

One area of censorship that is perhaps surprising, given NPR’s emphasis on giving listeners a clear view of the prison system, is their policy on talking about suicide. Suicide seemed to loom over many conversations I had over the course of my trip. It was one of the first things that Steve mentioned to me when I entered the Brixton station. In telling me why it was important to maintain your relationships with friends and family while incarcerated, he told me some of the people who don’t sometimes sink so low that they kill themselves. Two weeks ago, he said, an inmate had committed suicide, and the next day another one tried to.

The chain reaction that prison suicides can spark is a huge fear in the prison system. Outside producer Natalie Wright told me in between takes for Prime Time that, while NPR broadcasters will occasionally mention prison suicides in terms of statistics, they will never mention specific cases. Jimmy Batchelor remembered prison suicides with dread, and believed that this policy is justified:

“[Suicide is] probably meant to go through the official channels first before it reaches the channels of open talk. I don’t think that’s wise to be talking about deaths on the estate. It might spark an outrage and many people might start killing themselves and you’d be a direct result, man. So you have to really tread carefully.”

On-Air Identity

Before recording Prime Time with senior producer Nancy Prentice, Carl and Steve, Prentice asked me to give her a song to play as a segue during the program. The night before, I had looked up Steve’s discography and was stunned to find that he had

produced one of my all-time favorite UK dancehall tracks, so I asked Prentice if she could play it during the show. She said that she loved it as well.

After we'd recorded all the serious segments for the American prisons episode, Prentice mixed the song in and asked me to talk about how I found the song. So I told the listeners about how the last time I came to London when I was in high school and picked up an English dancehall compilation disc at a record store, and my favorite tune on it was one that Steve had produced with an MC three decades before. I described how it was one of the few songs in my life that I return to year after year, and how I thought it was one of the loveliest dancehall tracks ever recorded (I said the artist and track name on air, but will not here to preserve his privacy). "What do you think of that, Steve?" Prentice asked. Steve smiled and shook his head: "It's amazing...what can happen in this world." I asked Vicky Rouse afterwards why she told me tell the story—from that information, it would be easy for an inmate to find out who Steve was. She agreed that it was a grey area, but said that it was ultimately OK because that I only said his first name on air.

Though radio masks ones physical appearance and race, a positive feature for a media service in prison where racial tension can manifest in violence¹⁸, it is ultimately very difficult to conceal ones identity over the radio. This causes tensions, Hagues said, for a prison radio service based in south London that employs many inmates with London backgrounds and accents. He said that most of the critical mail that the

18 Goldhill, Olivia. "Racism in Our Prisons: Are We at Risk of Another Violent Murder?" The Telegraph. Telegraph Media Group, 20 Apr. 2015. Web. 1 May 2015.

Coldingley station receives concerns the underrepresentation of other regional English accents. On that point, Julian Mullins wholeheartedly agreed:

“The London ‘bruv, that’s a big track still’—the language that I don’t even understand what they speak—annoys me and annoyed a lot of other people as well. But you don’t blame those people. That’s the way they speak, that’s where they come from. But maybe my [Irish] accent went down better because it was something different than what they were used to hearing. I liked hearing different voices—I heard Welsh people, people from the north of England. I love hearing the difference in regional accents. I definitely agree with the thought of it being too centralized in London and having the same kind of accents and presentation style.”

Another barrier on NPR to diversity is fact that there is such a rapid staff turnover rate. For example, it was brought up during the final outside staff meeting that many Asian inmates have requested a music show that would play Asian music genres. Such a program seemed unlikely, however, because all the music would need to be scanned and censored for airplay by someone fluent in the language, and there would always need to be inmates with the desire and ability to do this to if the show was to be regular feature.

The Psychological Effect of Prison

There are so many glaring, deep-rooted flaws in the US prison system—disproportionate incarceration of black men, lack of funding and draconian sentencing laws that maintain bloated prison populations, inmates being segregated and controlled by gangs, violent prison staff, lack of mental health care for mentally ill inmates—that it is no surprise less concrete problems have received little public attention. However, bound up in many of these problems is the spectrum of loss and psychological harms that inmates endure while behind bars.

According to Jana Russell, Behavioral Health Services Administrator for Oregon Department of Corrections, many of these harms are related to the sudden, nearly total loss of control that is routine at most prisons:

“The first thing is, you experience tremendous loss. In addition to the loss of family and friends, that close support, you lose privacy, you lose control over your meals, you lose control over your work, you lose control over your housing, you lose control over your privacy, you lose control over your movement, you lose control over the lighting, you lose control over the noise, you lose control over your ability to go outside... These things create an environment that is not conducive to wellness by any stretch of the word. What do humans need? We need to feel like we have some control over ourselves, right? It’s where our sense of self comes from. It’s where our sense of our own power comes from.”

There are few choices that inmates can make on the inside: choosing a job or to be a part of rehabilitative services, choosing to participate in religious services, and choosing their relationships in prison, though Russell pointed out that many prison relationships, such as those formed in order to protect oneself from prison gangs, are hardly empowering.

According to Russell, Women generally need to talk and share information and be heard in order to do well in prison, and are often more open and honest about their mental health and any mental illnesses they may have. Men, on the other hand, often go to great lengths to conceal their true mental state:

“Men are hierarchical. There’s usually a boss and then his team. They don’t share personal information. They don’t create those vulnerabilities for themselves, and they can be very dangerous if they do so. So we’ve got a lot of men coming in...they deliberately screw up the psych test so they think we won’t catch their mental illness.”

Russell says that 52% of Oregon inmates have a documented mental illness, which is sometimes an illness that an inmate comes in with, and sometimes one that begins to show after some time in prison. In “The Psychological Impact of Incarceration:

Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment,” a paper written for the 2002 National Institutes of Health policy conference, psychology professor Craig Haney draws on the in-prison studies of other criminal justice scholars to outline seven interrelated ways in which the prison experience can influence the psyche of an inmate:

1. “Dependence on institutional structure and contingencies”
2. “Hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust, and suspicion”
3. “Emotional over-control, alienation, and psychological distancing”
4. “Social withdrawal and isolation”
5. “Incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture”
6. “Diminished sense of self-worth and personal value”
7. “Post-traumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment”¹⁹

When I asked Russell what she would do to lessen the negative psychological impacts of prison, she said she had a few ideas to alleviate what she sees as two of the biggest problems in prison: overcrowding and boredom. Many of her ideas were architectural: she told me she would reduce the size of the cell-lines pods where inmates live from around 100 to 31. She said she would also eliminate dormitories, or large rooms packed with bunk beds, because of the stress that they cause, and the greater sense of control and peace in cells shared with between two or three inmates. She said she would bring in more natural light, use more soundproofing throughout the building, allow the painting of murals on walls, and bring in movement programs like yoga and tai chi.

¹⁹ Haney, Craig. "The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment." *The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Dec. 2001. Web. 1 May 2015.

She would also bring in new art and music programs for inmates to participate in, which she considers to be some of the most mentally beneficial activities for inmates to be involved in. “It’s calming, and it brings people together in a pro-social manner,” Russell said. “It gives them a personal sense of control and power and joy and contributing to something.” Russell was quick to point out that the benefits of arts and music programs are not conjecture—it has been studied extensively, perhaps most compellingly in a 2015 article in the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* titled “The Impact of Relaxing Music of Prisoners’ Levels of Anxiety and Anger.” Though the music that they use in the study is limited by the fact that it is a unusually heady mix of new age and traditional meditation music, the researchers found that, studying 48 inmates at Ela prison in Israel over a three week period, the group that was constantly exposed to the music self-reported lower levels of anxiety and anger.²⁰

Craig Haney, too, came up some more general prison policies, conditions, and procedures that he thought must be changed in order to respond to the ease the negative psychological impacts of imprisonment. These are the four points outlines in his paper most relevant to this paper’s focus, compared with the impact of prison radio:

“The adverse effects of institutionalization must be minimized by structuring prison life to replicate, as much as possible, life in the world outside prison.”

Though NPR is structured and functions like an outside newsroom in order to efficiently produce high quality and varied shows to fill their airtime, this also serves to

20 Bensimon, Moshe, Tomer Einat, and Avi Gilboa. "The Impact of Relaxing Music on Prisoners' Levels of Anxiety and Anger." *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* 59.4 (2015): n. pag. SAGE. Web. 1 May 2015.

fulfill one the key changes that Haney suggests—a space within prison that operates on typical expectations of respect and autonomy. More abstractly, for the inmates not affiliated with NPR, prison radio helps curate an awareness and interconnectedness in prison that resembles popular media on the outside.

“Prisons that give inmates opportunities to exercise pockets of autonomy and personal initiative must be created.”

Inmate producers are not given complete autonomy, as the outside producers are required to filter the content they produce for illicit language and subject matters, but inmate producers are required to exercise initiative in guiding the tone and focus of the radio segments they create, pitching their own shows, writing their own scripts, and conducting a limited form of research where the outside producers supply them with approved research materials.

“Safe correctional environments that remove the need for hypervigilance and pervasive distrust must be maintained, ones where prisoners can establish authentic selves, and learn the norms of interdependence and cooperative trust.”

This is a change that obviously extends well beyond the scope of a rehabilitation program, but NPR provides a safe, productive space in which inmate producers need to cooperate and trust others other inmates and the outside producers to produce their shows. Shows like Julian Mullins’ Rock Show serve to encourage honest emotional expression and recognition of commonalities between prisoners. For the larger prison population, NPR encourages individuality by producing segments that explores issues that minority and/or LGBT inmates endure in prison and encourage inmates to “big up” each other and maintaining relationships with former prison friends through shout-outs read by NPR producers.

“A clear and consistent emphasis on maximizing visitation and supporting contact with the outside world must be implemented.”²¹

Though visitation is a separate idea entirely, NPR facilitates contact with the outside world in many ways: by conducting and broadcasting interviews with outside people, prison staff and celebrities, by providing news from the outside, and by allowing friends and relatives to request songs to be broadcast on NPR for their incarcerated loved one.

Radio as a component of restorative justice

An alternate paradigm to view NPR through is how it has introduced elements of “restorative justice” into the British prison system. Restorative justice is a model for prison reform—a response to many aspects of our current system of retributive justice that writers like Howard Zehr consider counterproductive and/or damaging. In some ways, restorative justice is a theoretical model, as some of its fundamental parts would be incredibly difficult to implement.

For example, in restorative justice an emphasis is placed on problem solving and restitution. But while the idea of an offender being obligated by the state to provide restitution to the victim is a morally and logically sound idea, it is clear that implementing a model for restitution could be prohibitively difficult when dealing with crimes besides property damage (i.e. how does one decide the monetary worth of a murdered relative?). In restorative justice, an emphasis is also placed on maintaining a dialogue between the offender in prison and the victim, in order to provide them both with closure and a mutual understanding. One can imagine the meaningful implications

²¹ Haney.

that this idea could have, but it is also hard to imagine it being successful in cases of a violent or sexual nature.

There are elements of restorative justice, however, that are immediately practical. In Howard Zehr's 2005 book, *Changing Lenses*, he details principles of restorative justice that I believe NPR has, at least in a small way, integrated into the British prison system:

“Focus on future”, as opposed to “focus on past”

NPR produces programming that prepares inmates for life outside prison and strives to aid inmates in being productive and safe and not reoffending after they are released.

“Victim and offender are key elements”, as opposed to “state and offender are key elements”

By allowing inmates to work alongside prison employees as radio producers, NPR deemphasizes the adversarial nature of an offender's relationship with the state.

“Responsible behavior encouraged”, as opposed to “outcomes encourage offender irresponsibility”, and “Offender's integration into community increased”, as opposed to “offender's ties to community weakened”

There is no data to support the idea that NPR reduces reoffending, but the fact that many former inmate producers have gone on to successful careers after release (some, like Jimmy Batchelor, as a radio producer) and many have participated in Outside In (23 former inmates participated in 2013) to help inmates prepare for life on the outside is evidence that NPR positively influences inmates' lives on the outside.

“Offender viewed holistically”, as opposed to “offender seen in fragments, offense being definitional”²²

²² Zehr, Howard. *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005. 211-214. Print.

Though there is a selection process for inmates to work at NPR, an inmate's offense does not define them during their time at NPR, where they are treated like skilled, curious, empathetic radio producers. Likewise, the journalistic radio content they produce seeks to present prisoners as diverse, three-dimensional people with emotions and stories (i.e. segments about being gay in prison, a show that presents mailed-in, 50-word autobiographies written by inmates around the country, a program about restorative justice that interviews inmates who have committed violent crimes).

The Psychological Effect of Radio

“I still actually have all of the letters that I received from various prisoners, and I will cherish those. In one instance a guy wrote in, his name was Garreth. There's a lot of banter between the various [letter writers], and they get know each other in some kind of a strange sense—they never meet, never speak, but they know each other from the letters they write in... And he wrote me one time saying, 'you guys,' as in the Rock Show family—that's what we were all called—'you pulled me out of a big hole this week.' He was feeling really down, suicidal thoughts all the time, and he said that the Rock Show prevented him from doing something, as in attempting to take his own life.”

—**Julian Mullins**

Mullins' idea of people bonded, and in this case helped out of a dark place, not by personal interaction but by a listening community is similar to international studies scholar Benedict Anderson's concept of an “imagined community”—“imagined” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”²³ In her 2004 book *Listening In: Radio And The American Imagination*, radio scholar Susan Douglas extends Anderson's idea that the newspaper

²³Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991. Wikispaces. Web. 1 May 2015.

was the most influential development in the creation of “national communion,” arguing that radio solidified listeners’ concept of a nation on new “geographic, temporal, and cognitive levels.”²⁴

According to San Francisco talk radio host Peter B. Collins, in an interview in journalist Peter Laufer’s book *Inside Talk Radio: America's Voice or Just Hot Air?*, a crucial feature of radio is that listeners do not ever need interact directly with the radio host or producer to feel like a part of the listening community:

“It is the projection of interaction and access for average people, and I think some people listen hoping to identify with a point of view or a caller, waiting for their point to be made or for their opinion to be expressed. For some people it is empowerment. You know, they are the ones who did not raise their hands in class, but got satisfaction from knowing the answer even though they were not called on.”²⁵

It is a powerfully connective medium, Douglas argues, because it resembles the oldest form of group communication:

“Radio also carried people back into the realms of preliteracy, into orality, to a mode of communication reliant on storytelling, listening, and group memory... Because the act of listening simultaneously to spoken words forms hearers into a group (while reading turns people in on themselves), orality fosters a strong collective sensibility. People listening to a common voice, or to the same music, act and react at the same time.”²⁶

But radio can also be very intimate, allowing a relationship based only on message and tone to form between listeners and hosts/DJs. Longtime public radio host and entertainer Garrison Keillor explained his perspective on this relationship in his appearance on PBS News Hour’s segment on *Prairie Home Companion* in 2014:

24 Douglas, Susan J. *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004. 23. Print.

25 Laufer, Peter. *Inside Talk Radio: America's Voice or Just Hot Air?* Secaucus, NJ: Carol Pub. Group, 1995. 194. Print.

26 Douglas, 29.

“I think there’s a lot power in listening to one person talking to you. And...and...and this should never be underestimated. There are movies made—enormous amounts of movie invested in them—and they’re very diffuse and they’re very artistic and edited and post-produced and jumping from here to there and complicated narratives and so on. But one person sitting and talking to you and you’re pulled in, in ways that technology and art and all cannot. We want to be talked to. We do.”²⁷

Though these perspectives help illuminate the potential radio has to have a positive influence in a prison environment, it was made very clear to me in talking with Julian Mullins about the role NPR played in his life throughout his sentence:

“I liked working. I liked feeling as if I was going out to do something and I had a purpose, and the radio gives you a purpose. In prison, you have to have some purpose, and it has to be something productive that you’re going to grow from. You’re not really going to grow from sleeping and smoking marijuana, fighting. You’re going to regress. And I really grew when I got to Brixton because it gave me the purpose that I needed to carry on. And it gives you a voice, working on the radio. Not just in the literal sense. But it gives you a voice in a sort of metaphorical sense as well, because you’re able to feel that you still have something worthwhile to offer... Otherwise, in prison you’re surrounded by emptiness and nothingness.”

Mullins explained that one of the many things that prison takes away from inmates is new stimulus, as inmates spend the majority of their days “banged up.” Though gov.uk, the governmental site for the Prison Service, states inmates “should be able to spend between 30 minutes and an hour outside in the open air each day,”²⁸ former Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons Dame Anne Owers explained in 2008 that a survey of 6,500 inmates revealed 50% of them spent less than six hours out of their cells, while 20% spent less than two hours out of their cells.²⁹

27 Brown, Jeffrey. "Inside Garrison Keillor's 'A Prairie Home Companion'" YouTube. PBS NewsHour, 25 July 2014. Web. 28 May 2015.

28 "Prison Life." GOV.UK. GOV.UK, 16 Dec. 2014. Web. 28 May 2015.

29 Travis, Alan. "Prisoners 'spend Too Long in Cells'" The Guardian. Guardian News, 1 June 2008. Web. 1 May 2015.

When I asked Jimmy Batchelor why he thought I was treated with such interest when I visited inmates at the Brixton station, he told me that in the dismal, isolated world of prison, there are very few day-to-day novelties:

“I remember being moved from Wandsworth to Brixton and looking outside the window of this sweatbox and I was seeing cars, and women pushing push chairs, and trains, and traffic lights, and signs. This shit you forget. When you’re institutionalized, you forget seeing these things. I’ve seen new cars out on the road, man—it was, like, blowing my mind. And I feel like I’ve lost a lifetime because I haven’t seen a bunch of youths standing outside the shop with their hoods up. All I’ve seen is men just standing around in the same color of tracksuit bottoms, just looking depressed, smoking cigarettes. So yeah, man, you make peoples’ day when you’re an outsider going in.”

In the visually static environment of prison, the lively soundscape of NPR brings to mind the phrase “theatre of the mind”, which originated in the late 1940s as a description of the way radio dramas engaged the imagination of listeners.³⁰ It is now a common expression, one that suggests the unique value of radio and, I believe, helps explain the connection inmates describe with NPR.

In the 1930s, a decade when radio was much more than a charming, intimate medium, professors Hadley Cantril and Gordon Allport wrote one of the first books about the psychological effect of radio. Despite the age of their work, their discussions and research are generally not outdated as they explore the deeper reasons for the nation’s fascination with radio storytelling:

A voice belongs to a living person, and living people arrest our attention and sustain our interest better than do printed words. The very transiency of the broadcast possesses fascination. Printed words endure; they are polished and perfected, and lack the spontaneity and human fallibility of the single performance... The listener has an imaginative sense of

³⁰ Verma, Neil. *Theater of the mind: imagination, aesthetics, and American radio drama*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012. 3. Print.

participation in a common activity. He knows that others are listening with him and in this way feels a community of interest with people outside his home. He feels less lonely.³¹

Examining the effects of listening versus reading, Cantril and Allport reported that “the mental functions of recognition, verbatim recall, and suggestibility (noncriticalness) are more successfully exercised when listening...Auditory presentation is significantly preferred for aesthetic prose passages and for humor.”³² Though these findings suggest that the spoken word is more effective at engaging people than the written one, the study also reports that comprehension, criticalness, and discrimination were greatly decreased from written to spoken material—they found that subjects applied much less discretion when listening to statements. “To be effective a radio argument need not be sound nor complete,” Cantril and Allport write, “But it must be well organized.”³³

Cantril and Allport’s research into the persuasiveness of radio reminded me of Jimmy Batchelor’s argument for listening to NPR rather than commercial radio—because it keeps inmates rooted in their reality. According to Batchelor, watching television with strong commercial elements has the potential to frustrate inmates with no access to the world portrayed on screen:

“This is where National Prison Radio is different, because it’s an organic thing that is built from inside prisons with relevant news to you, relevant stories to you, relevant advice. As opposed to the media—all they want to do is sell you...man, the amount of times I saw a Burger King advert and thought, ‘I...*fuck*... when am I ever going to get a Burger King? I want a Burger King now.’ If you look at it, the media that’s always trying to push on you those messages, are probably what got you into this situation in the first place, feeling that you needed the new thing, the new iPhone, the new...dunno.”

31 Cantril, Hadley. *The Psychology of Radio*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 2005. 18. Print.

32 Cantril, 178.

33 Cantril, 8.

Batchelor said that even commercial music radio channels without a focus on outside products and opportunities are presented in a way that can further disillusion inmates from their surroundings:

“I know some of the younger people in there, they love [BBC] 1Xtra. It’s like, why am I listening to National Prison Radio? But at the same time, if you listen to 1Xtra too much, it gives them visions of grandeur, where they be dreaming of being outside and partying and getting wild and it’s like, ‘you’ve been listening to that new Sneakbo track, innit? That Sneakbo track got you gassed. But you’re not going nowhere for the next three years, so you probably need to listen to National Prison Radio, which is more geared towards your mind frame and it’s not going to upset you, man.’”

Conclusion

Prison Radio in the United States

There are no networks of prison radio in the United States, and there is currently only one FCC-licensed prison radio station broadcasting from within a prison. Called KSLP-97.1 FM, it broadcasts out of Louisiana State Penitentiary, 6,312 inmate-strong prison commonly referred to as Angola. Established in 1987, it is a much different station than the one that operates out of Brixton. For example, rather than a studio built into the center of the prison, it is a cinderblock shed built on one side of the prison.

In a phone interview with James Bueche, Deputy Assistant Secretary at Angola, he explained how different KSLP's focus and influence is from NPR. All the equipment and records in the KSLP studio is donated, and any additional funding that inmates need is generated through fundraisers, like a local rodeo, according to Bueche. The content that inmates broadcast is all live, and all recorded in-studio—so no outside reporting and no edited segments. Instead, the station broadcasts blues, Cajun rock, gospel music, and “Christian programming”. Bueche told me that there's a “big push” to integrate Christian messages and values into prisoners' lives, prisoners who are often in for life. “There's a direct correlation between that and improvement,” Bueche said. On the other hand, according to inmate testimonies collected by Kalen Churcher, the station's religious tone has disillusioned many inmates who prefer the music. Occasionally, KSLP has guests, such as when an inmate interviewed George Foreman, or when prison

officials gave nightly interviews during the chaos of hurricane Katrina in 2005 to calm inmates, many of whom had relatives affected by the storm.³⁴

In order to listen to KSLP, inmates at Angola buy personal radios with their own money, which they often make through jobs in prison. Many inmates have them, according to Bueche. And though, according to a 2006 *Times* article profiling KSLP, Warden Burl Cain considered the radio station such a success that he approved plans to establish a television production studio at Angola, Bueche told me that there had never been plans to spread Angola's idea of prison radio to other prisons. I asked him if he considered it a problem that many inmates cannot read, limiting the information that can be quickly conveyed to the prison population through written material. He responded that Angola addresses the issue by recruiting inmates with high reading ability to help those who without, though acknowledged that radio could be a good solution.

Replicating NPR in America

American and British prisons are dramatically different in fundamental ways. The United States famously imprisons more people per capita than any other country, and according to a 2013 prisoner count by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, US combined state and federal prison populations amounted to 1,600,000,³⁵ dwarfing England and Wales' count of 86,000. But, the overall populations of these two countries are also very different—319 million as opposed to 56 million. A more manageable comparison is California, which has a population of 38.8 million (or 17 million fewer people than England and Wales), but a state prison population of 136,000 (or 50,000 more prisoners

³⁴ Churcher, 164.

³⁵ "Prisoners in 2013." Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS). Office of Justice Programs, 16 Sept. 2014. Web. 28 May 2015.

than England and Wales). So while overcrowding and limited funding are serious problems in UK prisons, they tend to be much more of a problem in American prisons. Another key difference: while Her Majesty's Prison Service governs almost all prisons in England in Wales, America's private and federal prisons have different governing bodies and state prison systems are controlled by 50 different state governments and electorates.

With consideration to the fundamental differences in the American and British prison systems, the ways in which the PRA was able to create and sustain national prison radio service, and the ways in which NPR succeeds in positively effecting the lives of inmates, this is a description of steps that I believe would need to be taken for a prison radio network to work in the United States.

Infrastructure

The most basic piece of infrastructure that has allowed every UK prison connected to NPR satellite equipment is the television located in every prison cell, as mandated by the Prison Service (which governs all HMPs and private prisons). In the United States, there are many different governing bodies for the state, federal, and private prisons, and there is no consistent policy in regard to television. In Oregon prisons, for example, inmates can purchase them for placement in their cells with money wired in from family and friends.³⁶ The Florida Department of Corrections, on the other hand, has banned in-cell televisions, opting instead to provide one donated

³⁶ Canzano, Anna. "Posh Prisons: Hardened Criminals Curling up in Front of the TV." KATU.com. Sinclair Interactive Media, 22 May 2014. Web. 1 May 2015.

television per day room, which serves around 75 inmates.³⁷ I don't believe it would be practical to stream prison radio over television in prisons with either of these policies in place. Prison radio should be an equal access service, and a significant financial barrier to acquiring a television—prison TV setups generally cost a bit more than \$200—would limit both access to inmates without money and the potential listening audience.

However, the Prison Service's decision to stream NPR over a television audio channel was based on the convenience of already having the infrastructure in place to receive a quality stream. Even if prison radio was to exist on a limited scale in the United States, for example in one state prison system, there is no state that provides every inmate with a cell television, and the cost of doing so would be prohibitive. Therefore, the only feasible way to transmit NPR content would be through an FM radio system as is the case at Angola. Radio transmitters, each costing a few thousand dollars, would have to be installed in participating prisons and inmates would receive the station through purchased personal analog radios. According to a 2014 *New Yorker* article, such radios are already a common possession in American prisons, more often than not in the form of the Sony SRF-39FP, a transparent, "indestructible" radio that costs inmates less than \$30.³⁸ More importantly, its battery life per AA battery is 40 listening hours, making it altogether an affordable device for inmates.

One serious drawback to broadcasting over an analog system would be that people outside the prison could receive radio content, compromising one of the founding principles of NPR: its insularity. Though FM is the preferable type of radio

37 "Quick Facts about the Florida Department of Corrections." Florida Department of Corrections. Florida Department of Corrections, Feb. 2015. Web. 1 May 2015.

38 Hunt, Joshua. "The iPod of Prison." *The New Yorker*. Conde Nast, 10 Jan. 2014. Web. 1 May 2015.

signal for its relatively high sound quality and shorter range, the radius of a prison campus is an extremely small range. This wasn't a deterrent at Angola—the *Times* article on Angola's radio station describes KSLP as “having limited reach over this patch of swampy farmland and razor wire northwest of Baton Rouge.”³⁹ However, for the few people who are able to pick up KSLP near Angola, its mix of Cajun music and “Christian programming” has a very low chance of ruffling feathers. Prison radio content modeled after NPR, however, would expose prisons to potential controversy, not to mention making a radio program considerably more complicated to host for inmate producers. This is an issue that would have to be navigated differently at each prison, depending especially on whether the location of the prison was rural or urban, but one possible solution could be to severely limit the broadcasting power of the radio transmitter to within the prison grounds.

Ideally several producing “affiliates” of prison radio would be built inside US prisons in different regions so that the voices of inmate producers would represent a range of different backgrounds and accents. I believe that the California prison system would be an ideal place to start a prison radio network for a few reasons:

1. California is taking dramatic measures to make its prisons less crowded and more habitable for inmates—the Public Policy Institute of California reported in April 2015 that since 2006 California has reduced its inmate population from 163,000 to 112,300 (still 135.8% of institutional design capacity).⁴⁰

39 Zielbauer, Paul Von. "Spinning Hope on Incarceration Station; Radio Coming to You Live on Death Row at Angola." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 11 Apr. 2006. Web. 1 May 2015.

40 "California's Changing Prison Population." Public Policy Institute of California. PPIC, n.d. Web. 1 May 2015.

2. According to a KALW 97.1 FM (San Francisco) radio piece from 2012, California has a \$460 million budget for rehabilitation efforts, “nearly twice as much as they had before.”⁴¹
3. Like England, California has a very strong music and radio culture, which would likely translate into enthusiasm for audio production courses, radio programs and for the development of a prison radio listening community.
4. According to a 2006 *San Francisco Chronicle* article, “roughly two-thirds of California's 173,000 inmates read below a ninth-grade level, according to corrections department figures, and more than half read below a seventh-grade level, making them functionally illiterate, unable to read and follow complex written directions. A total of 21 percent read below a third-grade level.”⁴² This shows a huge potential to more effectively inform inmates over radio about the prison system, services, how to maintain contact with the outside world, and how to reintegrate into society.

An advantage of NPR’s policy of pre-recording and editing all content that goes on air is that inmates can finish recording the vocal clips for a two hour music show in 30 minutes or less. This means that there would only need to be one recording studio per station outfitted with modern recording equipment. Besides the recording space, there should be a room with at least 10 computers armed with basic audio editing software. And like NPR, there should be a glass wall separating outside producers from inmate producers. Though it would certainly not be as convenient as NPR’s satellite system, it would be cheapest for recording stations to transfer completed shows onto a server, organize them into 24-hour sets, and then have receiving prisons drag the files onto their broadcasting computers using the Internet.

41 Jin Lee, Kyung. "Prison Rehab Programs on the Rise." KALW. National Public Radio, 12 Nov. 2012. Web. 1 May 2015.

42 Sterngold, James. "ILLITERACY REINFORCES PRISONERS' CAPTIVITY / State Prisons Are Crowded with Inmates Lacking a Basic Education -- Their Dismal Job Prospects Mean They're Likely to Land Back behind Bars." SFGate. San Francisco Chronicle, 27 Dec. 2006. Web. 28 May 2015.

Staff

One of the limitations of my research in England was the fact that I had few in-depth conversations with inmates who listened to but were not directly involved with NPR on the inside. In retrospect, however, it was not realistic to think that I would be able to get a comprehensive view on how NPR influences the lives of both participating and non-participating inmates. Though I talked to most of the producer inmates at NPR, I would have had to talk to many more non-participating inmates to even extrapolate how the general prison population might be affected by NPR.

NPR provides a service that is hugely informative for inmates and useful for prison management—after all, the ability to communicate messages to inmates was the Justice Ministry’s stated rationale for funding NPR in the first place. But I believe that NPR’s positive influence is perhaps even more evident in the testimony of inmate producers. Accordingly, I believe that a prison radio project in America should be pitched as a dually effective service, and part of the pitch should be to increase the number of inmates who have experience as inmate producers. At the risk of redundancy, Siobhann Tighe told me that the most effective pitch for prison radio would sound something like this:

“The argument for prison radio is all based around rehabilitation, both from a participant’s point of view, and a listener’s. As a listener you get messages about what to do in order to stop reoffending, as well as messages about where to get help with problems associated with criminal behaviour. It also aims to connect you with your family on the outside. From a participant’s point of view, radio script-writing, presenting programmes, editing etc, helps people with their literacy skills, their communication and engagement skills and prepares them for work. It’s definitely NOT meant to be a stepping stone to a career as a radio presenter on the outside, but if it did happen, then great.”

Though Coldingley's plan—to have 10 inmates at a time participate in an audio production course while simultaneously producing for NPR—is not currently in motion, I believe it is one of the most important ideas to borrow from NPR's service. Through a program that brings 10 inmates through a 11-week audio production training course/prison radio production course five times per year, a prison radio station could give 55 prisons radio production skills every year.

The selection process for inmate producers will always include tough decisions, and though Alex Cavendish speculated that NPR attracts an elite, literate group of inmates, he conceded that it was probably inevitable that those prisoners would be likeliest to produce professional content. In addition, the job of NPR staff is made much more difficult by inmates who are less inclined to treat radio production as a serious job, or who are technologically illiterate. Nevertheless, a concerted effort should be made to recruit inmates who are motivated but slower to improve.

Like at NPR, staff members should have extensive experience reporting or producing radio and should have a great deal of patience and empathy. According to Chris Impey, it is also very wise to have a significant female presence on staff to defuse the sort of unhinged masculinity that often reveals itself in prison.

Funding

As for funding a US prison radio project, NPR's strategy seems to be the only way: an umbrella prison radio charitable organization, with counsel from PRA, should be established to fund, staff, and oversee US prison radio projects. As finding funding for prison radio within prison budgets will likely be fruitless, someone should immediately be put in charge of applying for US grant-giving trusts. According to Sara

Lee, Artistic Director for the Irene Taylor Trust, a large charitable organization (and sometimes collaborator with NPR) that brings studio musicians into prisons to play and improvise with inmates, the key to organizing any sort of project in a prison is to form honest, trusting relationships with prison staff. Lee points out that for prison staff, bringing in any sort of rehabilitation project is a “logistical nightmare,” and it is just as important to support prison staff as inmates.

And then there’s the advice I received from Arthur Hagues. When I asked him how he would go about creating a new prison radio network in the US, he laughed. “Get the attention of someone powerful, with a passion for philanthropy,” he said. “It’ll be a lot of bashing your head against a brick wall.”

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